What Are Students Learning on the Football Field?

By John R. Gerdy

There has been much discussion around an incident last fall in Texas in which two high school football players targeted and deliberately blindsided a referee. But much more significant is that the players’ secondary coach encouraged them to do it.

This incident has drawn attention not only to the lessons being taught to young people through football, but also to who is teaching those lessons.

Recently, football has been embroiled in a number of other controversies surrounding the sport’s inherent violence, risk of brain injury, and distraction from academics. An NFL-funded report in 2013, carried out by the Institute of Medicine, found that high school football players suffered 11.2 concussions for every 10,000 games and practices, nearly twice as many as college football players. Despite these deterrents, many young adults still participate in interscholastic football, during which, many educators argue, they learn valuable life lessons in discipline, teamwork, and personal responsibility.

One of the most enduring impressions of my high school athletic and educational experience was how inextricably linked they were. My educational experience was seamless between the classroom and the basketball court. This was because all of my coaches were also teachers in the school. My basketball coach was my history teacher, and three other members of his coaching staff were also teachers.

My father was a physics teacher, as well as the head football coach. I spent a large part of my youth surrounded by coaches, all of whom were also classroom teachers. While they were certainly generous with their time and advice about athletics, what had a more lasting impression on me was the emphasis these coaches placed on education. While they all loved athletics, what drove them was the opportunity to work with young people in a teaching environment. They were teachers who also coached.

After games, the entire coaching staff gathered at our house. I would watch and listen for hours as these adults rehashed the game. Invariably, however, their conversation returned to the school and the education of young people. They were passionate about the young people on their team, not simply as
athletes but more importantly as students and as people. They were teachers who were committed to education and the school of which they were a part. All of them either had or were working on their master’s degrees, demonstrating a personal investment in the educational process, with years of experience in the classroom. Teaching, whether football, chemistry, or history, was their profession, their passion, and their calling.

Today, the link between athletic fields and the educational institution is much more tenuous. This breakdown impacts, very directly, the core justification for sports in our high schools. Specifically, it is far more difficult to justify high school athletics as supplemental to the academic process and educational institution and coaches as educators when a rising number of these coaches are not professional teachers. For many, the only school facilities they set foot in are the locker room and the playing field. This is problematic because there is little opportunity to integrate the coach into the academic community. As a result, many coaches have little appreciation for, connection to, or understanding of educational and academic expectations, practices, philosophies, culture, and mores. For whatever reason—low pay, unwillingness to deal with overzealous parents, etc.—the number of high school coaches who are professional teachers is declining.

Today, a high school coach is just as likely to be a lawyer, a salesperson, or a mechanic as a teacher. As he recently told me over the phone, the National Federation of State High School Associations’ executive director, Bob Gardner, estimates that fewer than 50 percent of high school coaches are high school teachers.

In far too many cases, the only "training" a coach receives, other than some basic seminars, is through observing how others perform the role or their memories from their own athletic careers. Often, these coaches model their behavior after professional and college coaches they see on television, which, for obvious reasons, may not be the most appropriate behavior for youth and high school coaches. The result is a diminishing link between what occurs on the fields of play and the educational institution because the leaders of the sports teams—the coaches—have little connection to the academic institution. Consequently, the goals, purposes, and culture of the athletic team often run counter to those of the school specifically, and education generally.

My point is not to trivialize the time, effort, and commitment such individuals exert coaching young people. Their efforts should be respected, appreciated, and rewarded. They are certainly not doing it for the money. And there are excellent coaches who are not professional teachers. There are also professional teachers who are horrible coaches. That said, there is no ignoring the fact that, on balance, the link between the athletic and educational experience suffers when there is no educational link between coach and school.

Coaches justify their involvement with young people on the basis that they are educators. The playing field or court, they say, is their classroom, and the lessons taught there in discipline, teamwork, and sportsmanship are just as important as the lessons being taught in the lecture hall or chemistry lab. But this decreasing overlap between teachers and coaches suggests that a coach’s background and commitment to the educational purpose of the school is becoming less direct.
In short, it is a sad commentary on the supposed link between athletics and the educational mission of the institution when all one needs to coach at a high school is to complete a basic seminar or two on sports safety and place a whistle around one's neck.

In the end, coaches are teachers and educators who wield tremendous influence over the young people in their charge. If we are to continue to justify our investment in high school football on the basis of its educational value, it is imperative that school board, parent, and coach associations take a hard look at coaches' backgrounds and credentials. When coupled with increasing concern over concussions and a growing sense that football has become more about winning than about education, if the link between coaches and the academic institution further erodes, football's place in our schools as a viable, effective educational tool will become ever harder to justify.

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